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The Modern Martyr and Disenchanting the Divine: Modern Case Studies in Religious Art

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The Modern Martyr and Disenchanted the Divine:

Modern Case Studies in Religious Art

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Spring 2011*



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Introduction

Modern art has witnessed myriad means by which religious, spiritual, and sacred themes were historically depicted—this reality still impacts our contemporary perceptions toward art and religious themes. These sacred subjects, as presented in the classical and romantic past—with reverence and awe— are currently as appreciated and celebrated as they were at their zenith. But because the potentially taboo connotations regarding such subjects—their current appreciation, even celebration, did not come so swiftly. To better understand our current notions and perceptions of modern religious art and its surrounding controversies, this study shall focus on the sociopolitical context—with its secularism and religious revival—of nineteenth-century France.

Nineteenth-century France was a vibrant theatre steeped in revolution and renaissance. Innovative movements in human culture gave rise to novel, if controversial, portrayals of religious subjects; but progress came not without its obstacles. For the sake of their viewing public's delicate psyche, artists who chose to portray religious figures were implicitly expected to censor scenes whose historical accounts might be considered gruesome or disturbing. But every revolution boasts its heroes. This creatively oppressive scene would herald a call to the modern minds intrepid enough to rebel. With the inception of the avant-garde, the modern West would witness not only the unprecedented query: "what is art," but also serve up a new context within which traditional religious subjects/iconographies might

be considered. Beginning with the French Revolution's atheist state, followed by Napoleon's later reinstatement of a Catholic nation, nineteenth-century France experienced dialectic between secularism and religious revival.

On the one hand, through the mid-late nineteenth century, France would witness a renewal of the Virgin cult known as the "Marian Age."¹ Resurging alongside the reformation within the Catholic Church, common Virginal iconography was not lost on the viewing public. Indeed, these symbolic icons and gestures were widely recognized, and often employed in the visual arts.² In Paris, this movement attempted to "revive early simplicity," and allow for the reinstatement of women's responsibilities within the church. This reformation is greatly associated with the leading intellectuals of the period, whose concern focused on the meaning of Christianity, rather than the (previously) infallible dogma.³

On the other hand, meanwhile, in 1863, French philosopher and writer, Ernest Renan published a naturalistic retelling of the New Testament, entitled *Vie de Jésus*, (*Life of Jesus*), based on his close readings of primary-source scripture. Selling sixty-thousand copies in just its first six months of publication, the book would witness numerous translations into myriad languages within its first year—quickly becoming one of the most widely read and discussed books of the century⁴—and it was not met without religious indignation. In his book, Renan essentially recognizes that the man Jesus historically existed— not as the Son of God, but as a simple, if unduly beset, man absent of any divine heritage or miraculous powers. In

¹ Driskel, Michael Paul. "On Manet's Binarism: Virgin and/or Whore at the Folies-Bergere." In *12 Views of Manet's Bar*, by Bradford Collins, 142-54. Princeton University Press, 1996, 142-164.

² Brombert, Beth Archer. *Edouard Manet: Rebel in a Frock Coat*. University of Chicago, 1996, p. 148-149.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, p. 147.

Renan's account, Jesus lived for an idea; he acknowledges that Jesus did bring humanity closer to the Divine, but he was still just a simple human man, suffering the same trials and temptations as does any average mortal—he was merely successful in overcoming them.

Renan wrote:

Jesus is the one who has caused his fellow men to make the greatest step toward the divine...In him was condensed all that is good and elevated in our nature. He was not sinless; he conquered the same passions that we combat; no angel of God comforted him except his good conscience; no Satan tempted him except that which each one bears in his heart...never has anyone so much as he made the interests of humanity predominate in his life over the pettiness of self-love.⁵

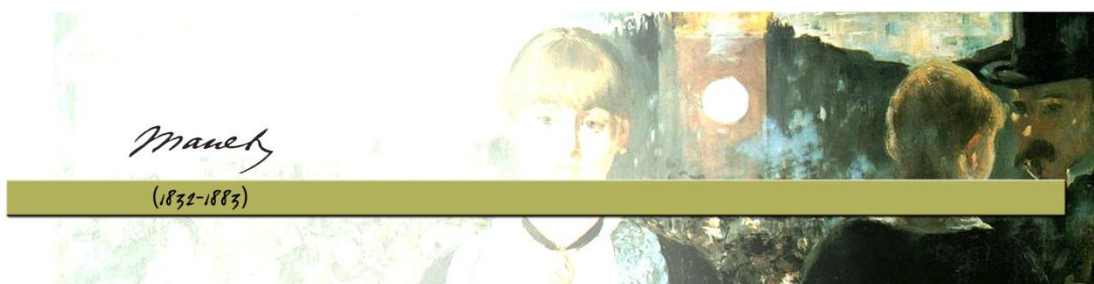
Caught in this discord between secularism and the Catholic revival, modern French artists Édouard Manet and Paul Gauguin, and Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh (whose most renowned work was both conceived and executed in France), all produced works dealing in both overtly and potentially subtle religious themes—to which entire books have been devoted. For the purposes of this study, a brief selection of works from these important, influential artists⁶ will avail as case studies to trace a transition in late-nineteenth century religious imagery—from the secular Naturalism found in Manet, to the revived (and personalized) Symbolist works of Gauguin—with a dynamic tension between the two tendencies, as seen in van Gogh.⁷

⁵ Renan, Ernest. *Vie de Jésus*, 1910, p. 366.

⁶ If not all perceived as such in their time.

⁷ The only Protestant amongst the three.

CHAPTER I



Édouard Manet was born in Paris, France, on January 23rd, 1832 to a well-off and well-connected family. His mother, Eugénie-Desirée Fournier was the daughter of a diplomat, and his father, Auguste Manet— a French judge. After failed nautical pursuits,⁸ Manet was finally permitted to pursue his artistic education in 1850. Between his First Communion and his Catholic burial in 1883, there remains no evidence to suggest that Manet had ever willingly breached church walls—beyond, of course, the obligatory attendance at his clerically-run elementary school, and the intermittent ceremony held by/for his various family and contemporaries.⁹ That is to say, if Manet was not consciously atheist, he simply did not concern himself with faith/religion as a fundament to experiential life. However, that

⁸ At his father's insistence.

⁹ Brombert, p. 147.

is not to say the subject did not intellectually and creatively captivate the artist. Indeed, the notion of an anguished Christ, suffering and sacrificing his very life for the sake of his people and his beliefs, did intrigue Manet—but as an epitomic expression of human suffering, rather than the redeeming Son of God:

There is something I have always aspired to do. I would like to paint Christ on the cross...What a symbol! One could rack one's brains till the end of time and never find anything like it... [No image] can ever equal the image of suffering. That is the basis of humanity. That is its poetry.¹⁰

Though Manet neither held nor practiced any religious beliefs (to current academic knowledge), that is not to say the treatment of religious subjects in other popular media—here, namely, literature—did not influence his own artistic treatment of perhaps the most central religious figure saturating contemporary French society: Jesus Christ. And in 1863, one book would stir a great, novel controversy in modern France—that is, the religious disillusionment engendered by modern Naturalism.

...[t]he sentiment that Jesus introduced to the world is still our own. His perfect idealism is the highest principle of the disinterested and virtuous life. He created the heavens from pure souls, where one can find all that can only be sought in vain on earth: ...sanctity fulfilled, the total abstraction from the stains of the world, freedom, finally, that existing society excludes as an impossibility and that has its fully amplitude only in the domain of thought. The grand master for all those who take refuge in his deal paradise is Jesus... In him is concentrated all that is good and exalted in our nature.¹¹

By way of *Vie de Jésus*, Renan essentially disillusioned any literal readings in Biblical mythos—instead assuming a metaphorical approach. Perhaps most notably, Renan insists that Mary Magdalene—commonly understood to have discovered Christ missing from

¹⁰ Cited/translated by Brombert, p. 148; after French: Proust, Antonin. *Edouard Manet, Souvenirs*. Paris: H. Laurens, 1913.

¹¹ Renan, Ernest. *Vie de Jésus*, 1910, Ch. 28, p. 410.

his tomb— was so overcome with passion, that she vividly hallucinated a resurrected Christ, rather than witnessing an actual resurrection. Publication under imperial, and decidedly Catholic, authority notwithstanding, the book was not banned—inciting a course of critical dispute. Whether or not Manet read the book remains yet uncertain—though as a member of the wealthy elite, Beth Brombert argues for the likelihood; but even if he did not, Manet could not have gone long without being subject to knowledge of it via word-of-mouth.

Manet's lack of personal religious beliefs and/or practices—only bolstered at the dawn of the modern era—arguably influenced the treatment of his overtly (and perhaps even his more subliminally) religious themes, as part of Manet's transitional oeuvre (from Realism to Impressionism). Manet remains an important figure in the birth of modern art, and his (then) controversial religious subjects have served as the gateway to new methods of religious depiction—effectually granting permission for future artists to create in kind. To better understand this progression from Naturalist/Impressionist to Symbolist imagery in the late nineteenth-century, this study shall first address his realist works of overtly religious subjects—id est, Jesus and the angels—as well as the possible, more implicit, religious allusions set in a secular scene—*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*.

“The Angels at the Tomb of Christ,” by Manet, the frightful realist, have been conceived according to quite a different method. If Lazerges's “Christ” is too pale, too clean, too scrubbed, Manet's, on the other hand, seems never to have known soap and water. The livid aspect of death is mixed with soiled half tones, with dirty, black shadows which the Resurrection will never wash clean, if a cadaver so far gone can ever be resurrected. The angels, one of whom has brilliant azure wings, have nothing celestial about them, and the artist hasn't tried to raise them above a vulgar level...¹²

¹² Cited in Hamilton, *Manet and his Critics*. 1969. p. 57; after criticism by poet and art critic, Théophile Gautier—who would go on to praise Manet's talent, how he “attacks each part boldly and knows how to preserve the larger unity of local colors. From one end of the painting to another his figures are related to the

Manet's religious paintings are often associated with this historical interpretation. Shown in 1864, *Dead Christ* (Fig. 1) has known many names. Now commonly recognized, if abbreviated as, *Dead Christ with Angels*, in its time, the piece was simply referred to as *Dead Christ*; it was submitted to the Salon, however, under the title, *Angels at the Tomb of Christ*; Baudelaire himself entitled the painting *A Resurrecting Christ Assisted by Angels*.¹³ Changes in name may suggest changes in the implied subject of the piece. That is, through a purely grammatical lens, *Angels at the Tomb of Christ* suggests the angels as the subject of the piece—rather than Christ himself, whom one might assume would claim center stage. Gautier made just as much a point to accuse Manet's Christ of dirty vulgarity as he did his angels—this is perhaps reason enough for the piece to don so many titles.

Angels at the Tomb of Christ renders a contemporary interpretation of Christ's resurrection, as told in one of many synoptic gospels. The viewer is immediately greeted by the vacant, unsettling gaze of the central figure—ostensibly Christ. As he rests upright atop his white burial shroud, he is both supported and grieved by two androgynous, if slightly-effeminate angels—each boasting immense, dark wings, and each cloaked in likewise bold, dark robes. Whether life inhabits his stilled body remains ambiguously up to the viewer's discretion: his pallor is deathly— but not yet to the point of decay¹⁴— and his musculature is

range of color selected, and are like the preliminary sketches of a master..." but concludes that Manet "intentionally abandons them at this stage and doesn't carry his work very far."

¹³ Hanson, Anne. *Manet and the Modern Tradition*, p. 106-107.

¹⁴ Schwartz, Vanessa R. "The Morgue and the Musée Grévin: Understanding the Public Taste for Reality in Fin-de-siècle Paris." *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 1995: 151-73.

In her article, Schwartz has pointed out that the Paris Morgue opened to the public in 1864, and displayed corpses on stone slabs for the public to come and experience the spectacle of human mortality, though she does not explicitly connect this fact to the deathly pallor of Manet's Christ.

simplified, but not exceedingly so; his pose is relaxed (limp) and open, bearing his open wounds to the viewer. To the bottom left of the piece, there sits is an engraved stone, which in English reads, “Gospel of John XX, 5-12” (Fig. 1a)—an overt canonical reference from whence this scene is drawn.

Spanish influences of style are quite obvious: painterly, yet precise brushstrokes are here juxtaposed with Manet’s signature shallow depth of field. As seen in scores of Manet’s other work, this flatness of plane is perhaps reminiscent of a stage setting or studio setup. Compositionally, there are no significant appropriations; however the snail shells in the bottom-left foreground (Fig. 1b) are a likely nod to Titian’s *Christ’s Entombment*.¹⁵ (Figs. 2, 2a)

As with Renan’s work, which cites this same resurrection scene, controversy does indeed surround this piece—of course for its divergence from the canon, but even further, for the manner in which Manet chose to portray Christ, or perhaps more appropriately, Jesus.¹⁶ The angels assisting Christ are clothed in colored robes—as opposed to the presumed purity of white—as told in the gospel of John.¹⁷ Their respective colors perhaps reflect respective roles in the scene—passive and active—though they are not located at their canonic

¹⁵ Hanson, 106-107.

¹⁶ This juxtaposition of the divine and the mortal—that is, the presence of Christ (Jesus) in an ambiguous state of mortality, against the (material?) presence of a divine being, in this case angels—calls upon myriad notions of the dichotomous nature manifest throughout Manet’s oeuvre, which Driskel argues Biblical presence for in Manet’s later work, *The Bar at the Foliés-Bergere* (Fig. 8) (to be discussed further later).

¹⁷ Cited in Hamilton, *Manet and his Critics*. 1969. p. 61; after Thoré’s critique: *In his second painting, the “Dead Christ,” he has imitated another Spanish master, El Greco, with no doubt as a sort of gibe at the bashful admirers of discreet and tidy painting. This dead Christ seated naturally, full-face, his two arms held against his body, is terrifying to behold. Perhaps he is about to come to life under the wings of the two attendant angels. Extraordinary wings from another world, colored a blue more intense than the very depths of the sky! Nothing like it is to be seen in the plumage of earthly birds but maybe angels, those birds of heaven, wear such colors. And the public has no right to laugh at them since it has never seen any angels, any more than it has seen a sphinx...One needn’t argue about angels and colors.*

locations: at Christ's head and feet respectively. There also stirs great dispute surrounding the stone inscription—as the gospel calls for an *empty* tomb. Further departure from universally accepted canonical interpretation is the spear wound on Christ's left side. While the right-hand side is commonly presumed accurate, there in fact remains no Biblical evidence to carry this supposition. So this placement of the wound does not imply Manet's ignorance of canon, as Rubens and Rembrandt show the wound on the left side as well.¹⁸

While divergences from the gospel did not go unnoticed, the forum of controversy primarily revolves around the nature by which Manet chose to depict this pivotal religious subject; that is, Manet's depiction of Jesus is historical—as opposed to the typically-depicted (expected) divine.¹⁹ But there yet lingers the question of Jesus' state of mortality, as compositional inclusions imply signs of life—the position of blurred feet implies movement, and facial features—including parted lips and glossy, open eyes. This piece was, and may still be disturbing (to some) in its realism, as artists, especially of the period, were expected to romanticize the scenes so as not to weigh too heavily upon the viewer's conscience. But there remains the issue of the human versus the divine; that is, one might question as to why Manet chose to still keep a halo—a universal symbol of divinity—effectively contradicting Jesus' mortal naturalism, if he was in fact no more than an average, mortal human.²⁰ Despite

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Champagne's own *Dead Christ* (Fig. 3)—in the Louvre at the time of Manet's exhibition—also depicts a mortal, unglorified Jesus, seemingly forgotten.

²⁰ Roos, Jane Mayo. "Angels at the Tomb of Christ: A Matter of Interpretation." *Arts Magazine* 58 (April 1984): 83-91.

Opposing Renan's Naturalistic influence, art-historian Roos argues for a resurrecting—instead of dead—Christ.

critical disclaim and sense of artistic and societal rejection, Manet shall find this theme irresistible once again in *Jesus Mocked by Soldiers*. (Fig. 4)

In the Salon of 1865, Manet exhibited *Jesus Mocked by Soldiers*—otherwise known as *Christ Scourged*—alongside his in/famous *Olympia*.²¹ (1863-5, Musée d'Orsay) This piece illustrates a scene in which Christ is tortured and mocked by the guards who hold him captive. The viewer is immediately greeted by the sickly pallor and weakened body of Christ bound and seated at the center. White cloth barely concealing his modesty, Christ's gaze is turned upward, but still away from the three guards looming over him. Blood pours down his face from crown of thorns, his beard does not match his hair,²² and his hands and feet are red and soiled—suggesting a working-man aesthetic. One guard, clothed in heavy, if ambiguous, animal skins, is the only figure to return the viewer's gaze—a flinty stare, met with neither shame nor remorse—as he moves to drape a crimson cloak over Christ's wilting shoulders. Another armored guard jabs at Christ's side, whilst the third kneels before him, offering up a reed staff. The background is darkened as that of a studio or stage setting; the only scenery one may make out is the stone seating and floor, and a reed and rope mingling at the bottom right.

As did its predecessor, *Christ Scourged* demonstrates the same painterly qualities and flatness—in form as well as composition—which perhaps again owes to Manet's strong Spanish influence. After Manet visited Spain in 1865, he turned from Renaissance methods

²¹ Driskel, Michael Paul. "Manet, Naturalism, and the Politics of Christian Art," 1985: pp. 44-54. In this article, Driskel argues for the gendering of Manet's Jesus *Christ* as the feminine opposite to the perceived masculinization of his *Olympia*.

²² The fullness/shape and (mismatching) tenor of Christ's beard is often attributed to Manet's own, as a possible martyr-identification.

to the more gritty naturalism of the Spanish masters.²³ It is during this time that Manet indulges in his contemporaries' taste for Spanish subject matter, and rather than exhibiting appropriations from any specific Spanish piece, Manet instead demonstrates affinities for the general Spanish style. Compositionally, however, Manet's *Christ Scourged* is most often associated with Titian's *Christ with Thorns*.²⁴ (Fig. 5) When compared, each piece demonstrates the same diagonal composition; each Jesus is likewise posed— with an upturned glance, hands tied at his side, baring pale nude legs; and both share a similar head type, with the thick, heavy beard.²⁵

While similarities vis-à-vis Titian's *Christ Crowned with Thorns* do exist, there remain departures from the old master as well. Titian omits the guard offering the reed, whilst Manet includes him. Titian chose to place a degree of emphasis of the soldiers' physical exertion and the pain of Christ, rather than the ridicule and humiliation we see in the face of Manet's Christ. The statue in Titian's background localizes time period, whereas Manet chose to neutralize the background—effectively separating the scene from time and space, even as he modernized the working-class body of Christ. Compositionally, Titian includes five soldiers, all of whom face away from the viewer, while Manet chose to include only three, with only one facing away from the viewer.

Amongst the commonly-referenced compositional sources attributed to Manet's *Christ Scourged* is Bolswert's *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, which in turn was produced after

²³ DeLieris, A. "Manet's "Christ Scourged" and the Problems of his Religious Paintings." *Art Bulletin*, 1959: pp. 198-201.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Incidentally, Titian is known to have paired his Christ with his image of Venus.

the van Dyck painting.²⁶ (Fig. 6) Both pieces depict the guard offering the reed, and both portray Christ with an undraped torso, framed by the hands of the soldiers. But Manet departs from van Dyck as well—in the guard with the helmet and lance, and the sentry clothed in fur garments, echoed hand placement.

While his overtly religious paintings allow for little deviation in interpretive reading, aside from the contention concerning Christ's mortality in the 1864 piece, much of Manet's work offers themes whose religious undertones tend to remain ambiguous. That is, his works do not blatantly portray common religious themes, but may have religiously iconographic or symbolic interpretation. Perhaps the most famous of these is *The Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (Fig. 7).

At first glance, the viewer is immediately met with the unreadable gaze of a flaxen woman standing behind her bar. She is robed in a dark blue dress and petticoat—emphasizing the overall azure tenor of the work as a whole. The barmaid is surrounded by myriad bottles of wine, liquor, and bowls of flowers and fruit. Behind the barmaid is a mirror, revealing the scene playing out behind the viewer, and our eyes follow to meet an awkward, if not physically impossible reflection to the far right of the image.

In his article, “On Manet's Binarism: Virgin and/or Whore at the Foliér-Bergere,”²⁷ Michael Paul Driskel addresses a possible religious interpretation of *The Bar*, which epitomizes the painting's inherent dichotomous quality. When regarding the barmaid as the Virgin, one must understand the historically religious context in which this piece was

²⁶ DeLieris, p. 198-201.

²⁷ In *12 Views of Manet's Bar*, by Bradford Collins, Princeton University Press, 1996. pp. 142-54.

created—namely, the Virgin cult of the “Marian Age.” As the Virgin Mary grew in popularity and worship—especially in Orthodox Catholicism—any iconographic and symbolic associations with Her would gradually embed themselves in the societal sub/conscious, and could immediately be recognized in most any work of art.

Compositionally, Driskel argues that the barmaid’s arms echo those of Jesus in Manet’s *Dead Christ*.²⁸ Finding some semblance of religious symbolism may be a stretch, but it is perhaps more likely that the barmaid’s pose simply echoes that of the Virgin, as seen in many an annunciation and adoration scene. According to Driskel, Manet’s *Gare Saint-Lazare* (1873, National Gallery of Art, Washington) may have been based on the iconographic tradition of the Madonna of Humility, and a pose such as the barmaid’s would be widely recognized as such.²⁹ Iconographically, *The Bar*’s bowl of fruit suggests the forbidden fruit of Adam and Eve. While it is commonly assumed that the apple was specifically forbidden, there remains no Biblical evidence to back this notion; the forbidden fruit could just as easily have been an orange. Perhaps supporting this view is the rarity and exotic quality the orange holds in Western Europe, especially for the period. Flowers—especially white—indeed support any virginal readings of the barmaid.

Supplementing the notion of meaning over doctrine³⁰ is that of modernity versus progress. At the dawn of the modern era, progress was viewed as the “new religion” of the period, and this is perhaps a defining characteristic of modern art, and this new progressive, secular society. As Manet expresses duality in *The Bar*, so too is his contemporary society

²⁸ Driskel, pp. 142-164.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See introduction, p. 2.

emblematic of the binary opposition, but here between modernity and customary religion. Ingres' *Madonna* (1854, Musée du Louvre) likewise combined two different aspects of the concept of "woman." The most obvious similarities with *The Bar* lie in the frontal pose of hieratic female figures, as well as placement of barriers.³¹ In essence, Manet chose a format which viewers might conceivably associate with devotional imagery, yet conversely composed the image in a secular scene.

When regarding the barmaid as the prostitute/whore, the conception of social class in the mid-late 1800s must be taken into account. Working-class women—such as Manet's barmaid—were often forced to supplement their income just to eke out a living; and in most cases, this resulted in the flesh trade—prostitution. Driskel has read the oft-debated mirror and its impossible reflection in the light of religious duality. In this case, the reflection in the mirror here suggests a sexual transaction. Though the reality of this conceived scenario—or whether it is the simple imaginings of a young barmaid—remains ambiguous. As with the virgin symbolism, opposing symbols may also be read into the presence of alcohol—here appropriately in abundance. Alcohol is/was commonly interpreted as a symbol of degradation and corruption—so where does that leave this poor barmaid?

This virgin/whore binarism may culminate into the idea of the first, paradigmatic woman of the Abrahamic tradition: Eve. As the barmaid is read simultaneously as the virgin and the prostitute, so too is the Biblical Eve. That is, Eve represents the exemplary virgin before she ate the forbidden fruit, and it was not until after she tasted said fruit that sexual

³¹ Ibid.

desire was realized.³² So the barmaid could therefore be read as the epitome of feminine duality. As far as religious iconography goes in possible readings of *The Bar at the Folies-Bergere*—according to Driskel—one may go so far as to conclude that Manet appropriated widely-known iconography and symbolism of the Immaculate Conception and placed it in a secular setting where he knew prostitution was commonplace.³³ In this way, Manet's Naturalism dealt with religion both implicitly and explicitly. While images of Christ from the 1860s secularized traditional religious iconography, by the 1880s, the *Bar* perhaps made religious allusions, within a secular, social setting.

Conclusion

In 1863, Ernest Renan wrote the book that would give way to a new vision of the Biblical Jesus—effectually withdrawing him from his divine throne, to a more humble, even sinful mortality. Renan made Jesus a simple man who surmounted the same sinful temptations we all face, but he ultimately suffered greatly and succumbed to his own mortality. Manet depicts Christ as this simple, average human man—in perhaps a reality disturbing to its audience—with only a subtle reference to an oppressed, self-sacrificing identification.

To better understand the context in which Manet exhibited his works—through both a historical and religious lens—one must have a basis of comparison. It therefore proves useful to consider the religious works of Manet's colleagues and contemporaries—perhaps the most

³² Driskel, p. 142-64.

³³ Ibid.

appropriate of whom are Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin—who all share in a strong Christian, if not strictly Catholic, influence and/or upbringing.



(Top) Fig. 1 Manet, *The Dead Christ and the Angels*, 70 5/8 x 59 in. (179.4 x 149.9 cm), 1864. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, H. O. Havemeyer Collection; Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.51).

(Left) Fig. 1a Snail shell detail: *Dead Christ and the Angels*.

(Right) Fig. 1b. Inscription detail: *Dead Christ and the Angels*.



(Top) Fig. 2 Titian, *Entombment*, oil on canvas, c. 1520. Musée du Louvre.



(Left) Fig. 2a Snail Shell Detail: *Entombment*.



Fig. 3 Manet, *Jesus Mocked by Soldiers*, oil on canvas, 75 1/8" x 58 3/8", 1864-5. Art Institute of Chicago.



(Top) Fig. 4 Champaigne, Philippe de, *Dead Christ*, oil on wood, 27x77 1/2, ca. 1602-1674. Musée du Louvre.

(Left) Fig. 5 Titian, *Christ Crowned with the Crown of Thorns*, oil on wood, 303 x 150 cm, 1542-3. Musée du Louvre, INV. 748.



(Right) Fig. 6 Van Dyck, Anthony, *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, oil on canvas, 223 x 196 cm, c. 1618. Museo del Prado.

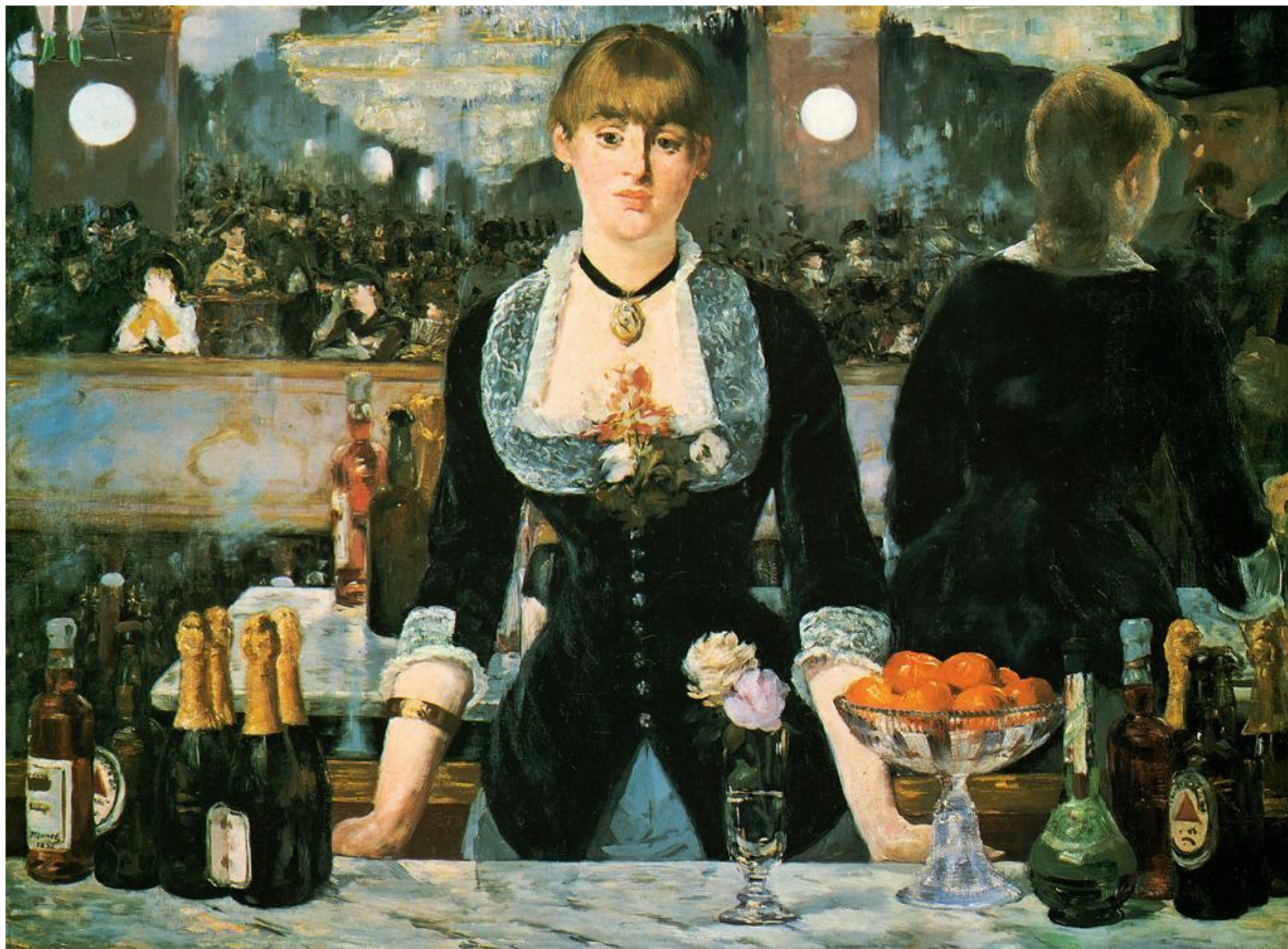
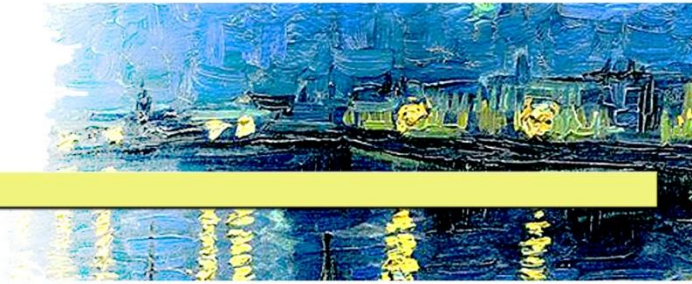


Fig. 7 Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, oil on canvas, 96 x 130 cm, 1881-2. Courtauld Institute of Art, London, England, United Kingdom.

CHAPTER 2

Vincent

(1853-1890)



As a man bearing the weight of a penetrating internal struggle, Vincent van Gogh leaves behind an essential, if occasionally cryptic, written autobiography via extensive correspondence with family members and colleagues. While this may satiate many an art-historian's thirst for intimate, critical knowledge, this correspondence would ultimately contribute to popular academic—educated, if frequently romanticized—speculation regarding the nature of van Gogh's life. That is, art history and popular culture/media alike have effectively, retrospectively transformed Vincent van Gogh from a destitute artist who ultimately committed suicide, to the contemporary saintly martyr of modern art.³⁴ In her book, *The Glory of van Gogh: An Anthropology of Admiration*, Nathalie Heinich discusses the rise to fame Vincent van Gogh has posthumously experienced.

³⁴ Heinich, Nathalie, *The Glory of Van Gogh: An Anthropology of Admiration*, 1996.

Lest one venture the risk this hagiographical redundancy, a short biographical introduction shall serve to aid understanding in van Gogh's spiritual development—by way of exploring important periods/aspects of the artist's life—through Heinrich's tempered hagiographical lens. As a case study, this chapter will examine myriad interpretive approaches to van Gogh's *The Starry Night*—in light of Heinrich's account, so as to situate van Gogh's approach to religion between Symbolism and Naturalism. Currently, Vincent van Gogh is widely celebrated as a sort of modern old master. In his time, however, van Gogh was largely regarded as a failure in most respects by which people are commonly, societally judged.

Vincent van Gogh was born March 30, 1853 to Anna Carbentus and the Dutch Reformed Reverend, Theodorus van Gogh.³⁵ Having been born precisely one year after his late predecessor of the same name—because late siblings often prove more potent rivals than the living ones—this “replacement child” syndrome could have viably incensed van Gogh's predisposition for mental instability.³⁶ Romantically, he remained barren—but not for lack of trying.³⁷ Since Freud and the advent of psychology, a great deal of study has been adamantly dedicated to identifying—diagnosing—van Gogh's cryptic condition. Some have suggested a genetic predisposition for mental health issues—citing a possible genetic linkage via familial trends.³⁸ Familial dynamics were often

³⁵ To be followed by 5 siblings: Anna, Theodorus, Elisabeth, Wilhelmina, and Cornelius.

³⁶ Meissner, W.W. *Vincent's Religion: The Search for Meaning*. 1997, pp. 15-17.

³⁷ During his young adulthood working as an art-dealing clerk, van Gogh would meet, and fall for, first object of romantic affection—facing ultimate rejection on discovering her prior engagement; later seeking prostitutes to satiate physiological and/or creative urges, he would take one and her children into his home at The Hague in 1890—this too ended in failure. Meissner would attribute this aspect of van Gogh's life as contributing to extensive bouts of deep depression—incidentally, van Gogh's romantic pursuits often marked pivotal transitional periods in van Gogh's psychological, spiritual, and artistic development.

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 13-14.

tense, as even his parents and siblings could not ignore the explicit eccentricities of his personal presentation and demeanor.³⁹

Financially, he got on well-enough via family means, until his transition to an artistic identification/focus—during which time he would remain largely impoverished, at the mercy of his artistic calling.⁴⁰ All familial attempts at tailoring a successful career for van Gogh proved futile—even his own monastic pursuits would ultimately fall through the cracks of psychological and spiritual hardship.⁴¹

In 1873, after the rejection of his first romance, a depressed van Gogh was transferred to Goupil's London branch, from whence his religious trajectory would take flight via increased isolation and ceaseless Biblical study. After finally being dismissed from Goupil and Company, he would delve deeper into religious scholarship by working as a teacher and assistant for a Methodist minister in England; until 1877, van Gogh would continue these studies unabated—moving to Amsterdam to prepare for theological school. However, after a year of notable—if fanatical and self-abusive⁴²—disciplined study, when it eventually came time to take his theological exam, van Gogh seemingly panicked—his lifelong religious passions would be translated into the more tangible, creative energy expressed in his art.

³⁹ Heinrich addresses van Gogh's awareness of how people perceive the eccentricities of his personal presentation and behaviors by way of a letter to his brother, Theo; arguing people have drawn from these, notions of the emotionally/psychologically/socially oppressed, misunderstood, mad genius.

⁴⁰ “*..I have a very thin time of it these days, as my money ran out on Thursday, so it was a damnably long time till Monday afternoon...It's not your fault, it's mine if anyone's. Because I was wild to see my pictures I frames, I had ordered too many for my budget, seeing that the month's rent and charwoman also had to be paid.*”—*Letters of Vincent van Gogh to His Brother Theo*, #538.

Hagiographically, this poverty aspect would perhaps inspire the oft-romanticized images of the humble monk, in pursuit of spiritual/creational/expressional release.

⁴¹ Extended family was well-known for their successful in art dealership, especially Uncle Vincent—(at least partially) after whom van Gogh was named; and so young van Gogh was implicitly expected to assume Uncle Vincent's art-dealer throne—and they would continue their pursuit well into his twenties, though van Gogh would ultimately follow his own path.

⁴² During this year of study, van Gogh would be known for ascetic practices.

Heinich suggests that, “[w]ell beyond questions of taste or opinion, the avant-garde apology of innovators is built upon the religious model of prophecy... [Projected up]on the artistic plane, it appropriates the figure of the precursor-genius, revolutionary by virtue of his art and, as much as possible, revolted by society.”⁴³ Artistically, Vincent was a relative latecomer—though his work is celebrated as innovative and successful today, he witnessed many trials in pursuit of his artistic passion. Van Gogh lived a relatively short career of roughly eleven years—the last two of which witnessed an increased burst of creative energy that would eventually compose nearly half of his surviving works.⁴⁴ After another failed relationship and two years of debt and depression, van Gogh returned to his parent’s parsonage in 1882 to set up studio.⁴⁵ Thereafter, he traveled to Paris in 1886—where his brother Theo was an art dealer—enrolled in the Academy of Art, and began attending Cormon’s studio classes—where he would meet (now) prominent Impressionists, and arrange art showings at a local café.

Two years later, van Gogh would travel to the South of France—later to collaborate with colleague Paul Gauguin in 1888— where he sought to paint in a country as “beautiful as Japan.” After extensive interaction, the two artists came to a general disagreement on the nature of this dynamism—their relationship climaxing two months later in the famed public incident, which ultimately resulted in the excised piece of a Dutch ear.⁴⁶ In May of 1889, he would voluntarily check-in to the Asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole in Saint-Rémy. Here, he created (now) renowned

⁴³ Heinich, p. 11.

⁴⁴ When van Gogh left his childhood home forever in November of 1885, he would leave hundreds of drawings and paintings that would ultimately be destroyed.

⁴⁵ Perhaps in reaction to his father’s death in early 1885—Vincent paints a still life of his father’s Bible that October, before leaving ‘home’ forever the next month.

⁴⁶ Gauguin found him in his apartment the next morning, a bloody mess. Vincent was hospitalized against his will in February of 1889.

work, *The Starry Night*—perhaps as part of a series of night sky studies.⁴⁷ After five months of hospitalization, van Gogh left the Asylum to take up residence Auvers, where themes introduced in his 1882 lithograph *At Eternity's Gate* would be revisited in a painting of the same name. On July 27th of 1890, he shot himself before returning to his current residence. Faithful brother Theo arrived the next day to be by his brother's side—he gave way to death two days later.⁴⁸

Though late-coming as an artist, Vincent van Gogh offers a relatively limited, but nevertheless rich, artistic oeuvre—each image presenting an effectual illustration of steps taken upon a greater path of artistic and spiritual progression. This path is perhaps climaxed in later piece, *The Starry Night* (Fig. 2). That is, *The Starry Night* represents the culmination of Vincent van Gogh's experiential life and trials—spiritually, psychologically, naturalistically/scientifically, and artistically. This study shall focus upon Vincent van Gogh's powerhouse-piece, *The Starry Night* as an exemplary manifestation of van Gogh's internal struggle—that is, spirituality⁴⁹ versus Naturalism.

When you have looked at these two studies for some time... it will perhaps give you some idea, better than words could, of the things that Gauguin and Bernard and I sometimes used to talk about, and which we've thought about a good deal; it is not a return to the romantic or to the religious ideas, no. Nevertheless, by going the way of Delacroix, more than is apparent, by color and a more spontaneous drawing than delusive precision, one could express the purer nature of a countryside compared with the suburbs and cabarets of Paris.

Gauguin, Bernard and I may stop at that point perhaps and not conquer, but neither shall we be conquered; perhaps we exist neither for the one thing nor for the other, but to give consolation or to prepare the way for a painting that will give even greater consolation.

Letter to Theo, #595

There is much scholarly contention surrounding the nature of what is arguably van Gogh's most eminent work, *The Starry Night*. Whilst some argue for a more literal, naturalistic study of the night

⁴⁷ Boime, A., "Van Gogh's *Starry Night*," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 59 (Dec. 1984), pp. 86-103; reworked in his *Revelation of Modernism: Responses to Cultural Crises in Fin-de-Siècle Painting*, Ch. 1.

⁴⁸ A funeral was held the following day—included amongst attending were Anton Hirschig, Lucien Pissarro, and Emile Bernard. Brother Theo dies the following year—two now buried abreast in Auvers. Hagiographically, Heinrich translates this drama of madness and rejection as attributing to van Gogh's posthumously-acquired modern-martyrdom, and pilgrimages to his grave site.

⁴⁹ As opposed to institutionalized religion.

sky, others draw upon the prominence of van Gogh's religious upbringing as evidence for a more spiritual reading of the piece.

Since his self-dedication as an artist, Vincent van Gogh created over 800 images, and his tumultuous spiritual trajectory is perhaps illustrated throughout his relatively short artistic career. *The Starry Night* perhaps represents an archetypal model of this progression. To better understand the context from which this painting came to realization, let us first explore some precedence, by way of one of his many illuminating self-portraits—one that demonstrates a particular relevance to spiritual discourse.

I have a portrait of myself, all ash-coloured... But exaggerating my personality also, I looked more for the character of a bonze, a simple worshipper of the eternal Buddha. It cost me a good deal of trouble, but I'll have to do it all over again if I want to express the thing. I'll have to cure myself even further of the conventional numbness of our so-called civilized state, in order to have a better model for a better painting.

—Letter to Gauguin, #695

As the title so generously indicates, Vincent van Gogh's *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin (Bonze)* (Fig. 1), was in fact a study and exchange in self-portraiture dedicated to his artistic contemporary, Paul Gauguin; this portrait has come to be largely known/ referred to more simply as “the *bonze*” portrait.⁵⁰ This reference to the *bonze* is perhaps incited by Emile Burnouf's article, *Le bouddhisme en Occident: Revue des Deux Mondes* (July 15th, 1888),⁵¹ but nonetheless expresses the desire for a “true religion which these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers?”⁵² The *Bonze* portrait demonstrates an attraction to spirituality in which mankind enjoys and celebrates a simple harmony with—as part of—nature. This Buddhist

⁵⁰ *Bonze* is an archaic term in reference to a member of the Buddhist monastic community.

⁵¹ Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, Huygens Institute KNAW. Vincent van Gogh- The Letters. Edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienked Bakker. 2004 - 2010. <http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let695/letter.html#n-9>; after Merlhès, Victor *Paul Gauguin et Vincent van Gogh, 1887-1888 : Lettres Retrouvées, Sources Ignorées*. Papeete, Tahiti, Polynesie française: Avant et apres, 1989.

⁵² *Letters to Theo*, # 542

reference perhaps indicates the artist's desire for a more universal, non-denominational spirituality than that of his institutionalized Protestant upbringing.

The Starry Night view through van Gogh's chamber window overlooks the eastern horizon from the Saint-Rémy asylum. A large crescent moon and eleven stars punctuate the dynamic, painterly weave of the night sky—especially luminous, against the cerulean overtones overtaking the expanse of the landscape. Pale white light hugs the hilly peak just over the horizon, suggesting an early, pre-dawn twilight.⁵³ The horizontal line dominates the composition; two richly symbolic subjects, however, do breach the vertical realm: the long, sharp steeple of the church amongst ambiguously-rendered village homes, and flame-like tendrils of one dark, towering cypress tree that pierce the celestial landscape beyond the hilly horizon.

Myriad perceptions pervade the potential spirituality surrounding *The Starry Night*. Religious themes are caught in the struggle between the lifelong pull of established, institutionalized religion—versus a more universal concept of higher planes of existence via spirituality—and van Gogh's (perhaps equally) passionate naturalist tendencies. As art-historian Tsukasa Kōdera states, “[h]owever eclectic it might sound, the principle theme of *The Starry Night* is the conflict between religion and nature, between Christian belief and naturalism.”⁵⁴ Especially before Gauguin's arrival in October of 1888, nature was a predominant theme in Vincent's Arles works. After losing his Yellow House studio—and thusly his hopes regarding institutionalized religion, via one quasi-religious community—emotional stress levels were only exasperated by the religious subjects painted by Bernard and Gauguin.⁵⁵ Although she does not explicitly discuss *The Starry Night*, Debora Silverman has written a book whose thesis states that van Gogh's difference with Gauguin

⁵³ Further indicated given its cardinal orientation.

⁵⁴ Kōdera, Tsukasa. *Vincent van Gogh: Christianity Versus Nature*, p.89.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

over religion might be largely attributed to the former's materialist Protestant upbringing, and the latter's erstwhile Catholicism.⁵⁶

This sort of reading of religious turmoil reaches beyond strictly art-historical analysis to span across the academic spectrum. Given a good deal of posthumous psychoanalytical research, largely based on the artist's correspondence and artistic analysis of his art—Dr. W.W. Meissner favors a religious/spiritual reading of van Gogh's work, as does many an art-historian. He states that *The Starry Night* is not a landscape in the usual sense, but rather an expression of something in Vincent's "heart and mind," arguing for van Gogh's view regarding the almost mystical appeal in contemplating the stars and heavens. The inner-turmoil van Gogh battled over his spiritual feelings combined with the tension he felt toward the psychologically embedded, more traditional Christian attitudes regarding nature. This conflict not only inhibited him from painting overtly religious subjects—as seen in exchange of letters with Emile Bernard and Paul Gauguin⁵⁷—but also made him question the legitimacy of such subjects—for they challenged his rejection of the established church authority and his abandonment of traditional theological views.⁵⁸ Meissner ultimately concludes that "The painting of *The Starry Night* may serve as an example of how powerful religious, even mystical themes may be contained in Vincent's art—despite his disclaimer."⁵⁹ This critical position differs significantly from that of Albert Boime.

"Despite his attachment to the Bible and the Church in the previous decade, he progressively followed a positivist line until by 1889 he could claim that everywhere organized religion was 'crashing,' and he kept warning his brother to flee the whitewashed wall, which meant hypocrisy and

⁵⁶ Silverman, Debora. *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1st edition Nov. 2000.

⁵⁷ For example, Gauguin's *Yellow Christ*.

⁵⁸ Meissner, W.W. *Vincent's Religion: The Search for Meaning*. New York: Peter Lang, 1997, p. 160.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

everlasting Pharisaism.”⁶⁰ As opposed to the common interpretations of religious/spiritual inner-turmoil often attributed to *The Starry Night*, Boime here takes a more naturalist approach,⁶¹ emphasizing a non-theological, sort of pantheistic spirituality.

Spatial/directional amendments to the piece notwithstanding—i.e. the village and church—Boime argues for the celestial accuracy of *The Starry Night*, citing the astronomic precision presented in images such as *The Café Terrace at Night* (Fig. 3), and *Starry Night over the Rhône River* (Fig. 4) as evidence to this effect. He agrees with astronomer Charles Whitney’s claims that *Rhône River* is depicted so accurately as to serve as a navigational tool.⁶² According to Boime, “[t]he artist’s shifting of the church to the compositional center demonstrates the need to comment upon this human construct within the natural context.”⁶³ Boime here accounts for nebulae-ic celestial swirls and terrestrial church re-placement, as commonly referenced in arguments favoring the notion of van Gogh’s religious/naturalist struggle, further claiming that “apocalyptic exaltation is not associated with the church but with the movement in the sky”⁶⁴

Boime continues: “[a]bundant references to Hans Christian Anderson, Carlyle, Longfellow, and Whitman often occur in association with astronomical metaphors for religious experience. [Van Gogh] [here] echoes their non-theological terms for Divine Reality such as *Infinity*, *Immensity*, and *Force*.” Boime ultimately concludes that *Starry Night* represents a convergence of physical and mental-health anxieties: given the systematic capacity of Flammarion’s⁶⁵ cosmological insights, van Gogh composed a quixotic image that he hoped might unfetter others from their fear of the

⁶⁰ Cited in Boime, A. *Revelation of Modernism: Responses to Cultural Crises in Fin-de-Siècle Painting*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008, p. 23; after *Complete Letters*, 3:433, letter W 4, #306.

⁶¹ Boime, A., “Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*,” *Arts Magazine*, vol. 59 (Dec. 1984), pp. 86-103; reworked in his *Revelation of Modernism: Responses to Cultural Crises in Fin-de-Siècle Painting*, Ch. 1, p. 23.

⁶² Whitney, Charles. “The Skies of Vincent van Gogh.” *Art History*, September 1986: 351.

⁶³ Boime, pp. 22-3.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Prominent period astronomer to whom Boime owes much of his scientific-idealist argument.

unknown; “[b]y doing so, he innovated a radical modernism that navigated between an absolute realist or naturalist style and a more symbolic pictorial order that converged with contemporary scientific offering fresh explanations of spiritual phenomena.”⁶⁶ Boime thus takes a scientific slant—strategically positing *The Starry Night* somewhere betwixt Naturalism and Symbolism.

More recently, art-historian Jirat-Wasiutynski largely concurs that van Gogh was likely familiar with the texts Boime cited, but disagrees with Boime’s assertion that the artist “looked to science for the solution to humanity’s pressing problems.”⁶⁷ Instead, Jirat-Wasiutynski assumes a more symbolic approach, emphasizing such significance in the cypress tree. In Mediterranean culture, cypress trees were traditionally planted in cemeteries—for their associations with immortality, but also Hades, the embodiment of death, and god of the underworld.⁶⁸ The cypress was thus placed in cemeteries because it betokened immortality, as much as because of its grave image. Since the cypress is so enduring and prolific—as it stays evergreen year-round, and its wood does not decay and has a sweet smell—it has traditionally been considered a symbol of immortality.

Moreover, Jirat-Wasiutynski emphasizes that easterly view from the asylum included neither the village in the middle distance nor the cypresses in the foreground—as a comparison with other paintings by Van Gogh and with photographs makes clear. These components were added to create a symbolic composition. Jirat-Wasiutynski has many dis/agreements with *The Starry Night* scholarship, but ultimately concludes that “[o]bservation, exaggeration, and invention were combined here to produce one of those desired consoling images of a purer nature” which Van Gogh, Bernard, and Gauguin had all distantly discussed via written correspondence.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Boime, p. 50.

⁶⁷ Jirat-Wasiutynski, V., “Vincent van Gogh's Paintings of Olive Trees and Cypresses from St.-Rémy,” p. 659; after Boime’s “Van Gogh's Starry Night.”

⁶⁸ Ibid, 659.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 658.

Lauren Soth takes this symbolic approach to a new context: “[u]nable to paint *The Agony in the Garden*, Van Gogh projected its emotional content onto nature and created a sublimated image of his deepest religious feelings. At its most profound level, *The Starry Night* is Van Gogh's *Agony*.”⁷⁰ Along the same lines as the prominent themes of religious inner-turmoil, arises the theory of Biblical reference. Here she argues for the strong, if subliminal, Biblical narrative portrayed in *The Starry Night*—citing olive trees as an icon of responsibility and resilience, and the sky as containing an element of hoped-for consolation. She finds the result is “strangely moving,” as these are the exact components of a *Gethsemane* as presented to the reader of the Biblical text, or as visualized by traditional images showing an angel consoling Christ—Christ who had retired to the Mount of Olives after the Last Supper to meditate and to pray to God about his coming Passion and death.⁷¹

In July, and again in September, of 1888, Vincent van Gogh painted his own two versions of *Christ in the Garden of Olives*—each depicting an image of a kneeling Christ, being comforted by an angel. He scrapped the both of them—stating in letters to Emile Bernard and his brother Theo that “one must not do figures of such importance without a model;”⁷² but van Gogh is also known to have censored his own religious painting for moral as well as aesthetic reasons, for van Gogh distrusted modern religious painting, just as he did the morality of modern religious institutions.⁷³ Instead, Jirat-Wasiutynski attributes van Gogh’s version of *Christ in the Garden of Olives* to perhaps a more readily-apparent reading of his *Olive Trees with Alpilles in the Background* (1889, Collection Mrs. John Hay Whitney).⁷⁴ Whilst Biblical and/or spiritual readings pervade *Starry Night* scholarship—as seen throughout Kodera, Meissner and Soth—the more Naturalist readings of

⁷⁰ Soth, L., *Van Gogh's Agony*, *Art Bulletin*, LXVIII1, 986, pp. 301-313.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² *Complete Letters II* # 505, 601 (ca. July, 1888).

⁷³ Wasiutyriski, pp. 656-7.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Boime, Whitney, and Jirat-Wasiutynski certainly warrant their own merit; though that is not to say these seemingly-dichotomous interpretations might not co-exist the same space.

Conclusion

*That does not prevent me from having a terrible need of—shall I say the word?—of religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars...*⁷⁵

The Starry Night is a complex symbolic image that may be conclusively interpreted as a visual articulation of the longing for the possibility of ultimate heavenly consolation—a notion traditionally associated with the Christian belief in afterlife.⁷⁶ Though Vincent here refers to the painting *Starry Night over the Rhône* (Fig. 3),⁷⁷ in *The Starry Night* of 1889, there is a more obviously symbolic link as cypresses rise from earth to Heaven in the immediate foreground; this link is echoed by the church spire, which just penetrates the mountainous horizon.⁷⁸

Van Gogh praises Whitman as the American poet who “sees in the future, and even in the present, a world of healthy, carnal love, strong and frank—of friendship—of work—under the great starlit vault of heaven as something which after all one can only call God—and eternity in its place above the world.”⁷⁹ Given the dominance (organized) religion held over a majority of van Gogh’s life, it is safe to say that its presence could manifest, if unconsciously and more universally, in as powerful and enigmatic a masterwork as *The Starry Night*.

⁷⁵ Letter from Vincent to his brother Theo, # 543, September 1888.

⁷⁶ Sund, Judy. *The Sower and the Sheaf: Biblical Metaphor on the Art of Vincent van Gogh*. The Art Bulletin. Vol. 70, no. 4 (Dec 1988): 659.

⁷⁷ The only image of the night sky, Jirat-Wasiutyriski believes, in which the constellations can be “securely identified.” p. 660

⁷⁸ Sund, p. 661.

⁷⁹ *Complete Letters*, letter W 4; 306.

Having been dismissed from his lay-clerical position on the grounds of extremism and eccentricity, Vincent van Gogh came to mistrust most institutionalized religion, and thus turned to art as his means of passionate release; he was also thus dissuaded from modern approaches to conventional Christian iconography—and he stood not at all alone in this respect. As seen in the selected works of Manet, religious themes that were explicit in the 1860s, had been relatively displaced from the realm of French avant-garde painting of the 1870s and 1880s. Though the pictorial presentation of well-known Biblical episodes frequently continued to engage mainstream artists, many progressive critics had long since censured their energies.⁸⁰ Given van Gogh's passionate temperament regarding nature, religion/spirituality, and the avant-garde, I find it difficult not to read these potent themes (at least lingering) throughout van Gogh's oeuvre—especially in *The Starry Night*. The rift between science and spirituality—between Naturalism and Symbolism—in this piece seems largely considered as spectrally dichotomous—incapable of concomitance within the same space; but who's to say there is no spiritual passion in Nature? Perhaps striking a more Romantic tenor, Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* searches for “God”—mysticism, celestial *other*, etc.—in a universal Nature/the Cosmos. *The Starry Night* is the culmination of the life and times of Vincent van Gogh—exemplary of his spiritual, psychological, naturalistic/scientific, and artistic experiences.

⁸⁰ Sund, p. 667.



Fig. 1 Van Gogh, *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Gauguin (Bonze)*, oil on canvas, 62 X 52 cm, 1888.



Fig. 2 Van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, oil on canvas, 29 x 36 1/4 (73.7 x 92.1 cm), 1889. The Museum of Modern Art, 472.1941.



Fig. 3 Van Gogh, *Starry Night over the Rhône*, 72.5 x 92 cm, 1888. Musée d'Orsay.

C H A P T E R 3



Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin was born June 7th, 1848, in Paris, France—two weeks before the June Days of France’s 1848 Revolution. His family consisted of radical proto-socialist activists, who sought exodus from France shortly following the election of Louis Napoleon to lead the Second Republic. They returned in 1854, and within that coming decade, Gauguin received the formal education that Debora Silverman argues would “shape his mental framework and core attitudes toward reality.”⁸¹ In what he would later refer to as the “theological studies of [his youth],” Gauguin was instructed as a boarder in a Catholic seminary in Orleans, where his education included Catholic liturgy, language, classics, philosophy, and Biblical literature;⁸² the difference from van Gogh’s Protestant background could not be more pronounced. At the head of Gauguin’s boarding school education was none other than the Bishop of Orleans himself,

⁸¹ Silverman, Debora. *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art*, p. 121.

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 122.

Bishop Félix Dupanloup—the fountainhead of contemporary Catholic pedagogy. Gauguin here found himself on the receiving end of the Bishop’s hope for the future of Catholicism; through at least four years of theological education, Gauguin was instilled with “the four central principles of the Bishop’s renovated Catholic teaching: Idealist anti-naturalism; inwardness and imagination; identification; and a cultivation of interior vision, which subordinated the operation of sensory sight to the experience of divine light.”⁸³ These values maintain facile evidence, manifest throughout Gauguin’s creative oeuvre.

Upon discovery of an ostensibly “native” Peruvian heritage,⁸⁴ Gauguin came to associate himself with the archetypal—or noble—savage;⁸⁵ so what he found in Pont-Aven was the ideal setting in which to explore his supposedly native “savagery.” In February of 1888, Gauguin set off to the northwest coast of France—to the small village of Pont-Aven.

“I love Brittany,” Gauguin declared, in a letter to Emile Bernard, “I find wildness and primitiveness there. When my wooden shoes resound on this soil of granite, I hear the muffled, dull, and powerful tone that I try to achieve in my painting.”⁸⁶ Popularly regarded as secluded from time, and marked with a “primitive” appeal to urban tourists, Pont-Aven was home to an established and economical art colony to which Gauguin was drawn for its supposed primitive

⁸³ Ibid, 123.

⁸⁴ Though he claimed native Inca heritage amongst contemporaries, Gauguin owed his true lineage to an elite Peruvian Colonialist family.

⁸⁵ The term noble savage (French: *bon sauvage*) expresses the notion of an idealized indigene, outsider, or “other.” The term was coined in John Dryden’s 1672 play, *The Conquest of Granada*; later, it became identified with the idealized image of “nature’s gentleman”—an aspect of 18th-century sentimentalism.

⁸⁶ Cited in Silverman. *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art*, p. 93; after translation in William Darr and Mary Matthew’s *Looking at Art from the Inside Out*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 60; the original reads “J’aime la Bretagne, j’y trouve le sauvage, le primitif. Quand mes sabots résonnent sur ce sol de granit, j’entends le ton sourd, mat et puissant que je cherche en peinture” (Merlhès, Correspondance, p. 172, #141).

nature.⁸⁷ Pont-Aven also maintained a strong tradition of religious practice, so when Gauguin submerged himself not only in this “primitive,” but also powerfully religious setting, he would culminate this self-sacrificing identification with the image of the ‘savage Christ.’

Gauguin did not begin his professional career as an artist. In his mid-teens, a young and virile Gauguin left home in maritime pursuits⁸⁸—serving in both the merchant marines and French navy until 1871, where he served required military service, before returning home and becoming a stockbroker. Here, he would get married to Mette-Sophie Gad, and proceed to have 5 children—all of whom he would ultimately forsake in the passions of artistic pursuits.⁸⁹

In a letter to contemporary and colleague, Émile Schuffenecker,⁹⁰ Gauguin is widely quoted regarding the approach with which he pursued this late-coming artistic passion:

*A piece of advice, do not imitate nature. Art is an abstraction; draw it out from nature while dreaming in front of it and think more about the abstract act of creation than about the result; it is the only way to ascend to God while imitating our divine master in the process of creation.*⁹¹

Gauguin perhaps exemplifies the Symbolist Catholic, if practically understated, approach to religious subject matter. He offers a unique, if bold perspective regarding the relationship of art, nature, and religion. This chapter shall serve as an exploration of this artist’s approach to

⁸⁷ In their article “Les Donnés Bretonnantes.” *Art History*, 3: 414-44, Orton and Pollock propose that Brittany was in fact not primitive at all—instead insisting the locale was just as modernized as everywhere else, but the “primitivist” aspect served well in tourist appeal.

⁸⁸ Gauguin would demonstrate this penchant for travel throughout his life; the most prominent of such excursions includes Gauguin’s extended stay in the Marquesas and Tahiti, where he would produce works dealing in primitivism, colonialism and Biblical metaphor.

⁸⁹ Despite a lack of financial success, Gauguin came to believe he could make it full-time as an artist—and so he stayed behind to paint when his family left for Denmark out of extreme financial need.

⁹⁰ Émile Schuffenecker was a French Post-Impressionist artist, and art teacher and collector; he was friend of Gauguin, and one of the first among van Gogh collectors.

⁹¹ Gauguin, *Avant et après*, p. 154.

religious subject matter, specifically in Brittany as a case study of themes that would later follow Gauguin to Tahiti. A great many people, feeling the weight of life's sacrificial burden, have identified with the notion of martyrdom; Gauguin identified himself artistically, not with just any martyr, but with the primary martyr of Christianity: Jesus Christ. While initially met with dismissal,⁹² if not righteous indignation, the religious works of Paul Gauguin broke the ice of the modern religious attitude and means of depiction—essentially granting permission for future artists to create in kind.

*It is the face of an outlaw, ill-clad and powerful like Jean Valjean—with an inner nobility and gentleness. The face is flushed, the eyes accented by the surrounding colors of a furnace-fire. This is to represent the volcanic flames that animate the soul of the artist...The girlish background with its childlike flowers is there to attest to our artistic purity. As for this Jean Valjean whom society has oppressed—cast out--...is he not equally a symbol of the contemporary Impressionist painter? In endowing his with my features, I offer you as well an image of myself a portrait of all the wretched victims of society*⁹³

Named after Victor Hugo's novel, Gauguin's *Les Misérables* (Fig. 1) is a self-portrait illustrating the early beginnings of Gauguin's modern-martyr identifications. In this case, the artist assumes the role of Jean Valjean, the exalted thief of the French Revolution. Gauguin portrays himself in conversely warm and cold light against a fiery orange backdrop, with white flowers likely alluding to purity and innocence, and a no-so-subtle reference to his colleague Emile Bernard graces the top right corner. Gauguin here identifies with the bandit-hero, who he claims as the "victim of social oppression and an ecstatic cultivation of his own agonistic

⁹² So satisfied with his *Vision after the Sermon*, Gauguin attempted to donate it to a local church; but it rejected the piece outright, believing it to be a joke.

⁹³ English translation: Cachin, "Gauguin Portrayed by Himself and Others," in Brettell et al., *Art of Gauguin*, p. xx; French: Cooper, *Gauguin: Letters*, pp. 243-245.

creativity.”⁹⁴ Jean Valjean is a figure of secular oppression—cast out by society—and self-sacrifice. Yet Gauguin’s Jean Valjean is an allegory of Christ, and is perhaps the first step, a foretelling of the artist’s own identification with Christ himself.

*Paul Gauguin used his art to explore visionary incorporeality. Pictorial, personal and theological factors...combined to make The Vision after the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel, a symbolist image seeking release in the weightlessness of the dream...*⁹⁵

Gauguin set out upon his palpably religious themes in September of 1888 with *The Vision after the Sermon* (Fig. 2).⁹⁶ This scene depicts a group of Breton women experiencing a sermon in the silent, motionless veneration which serves to demonstrate the power of this local fidelity. Only one figure in the foreground is shown with her eyes open, gazing toward the vision of two clashing figures farther back. These two faceless figures struggle in heart of battle atop a bright vermillion field; the dominant figure is presumed to be the angel, for he boasts vibrant golden wings. The tree at center stage overlays a small bovine figure—both proportions of whom, in this context, immediately challenge spatial and dimensional realities alike. Gauguin subtly includes a self-portrait to the far right—a tonsured monk, eyes also closed in silent reverence, likewise experiencing the vision here in question.

The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.
—Genesis 32:22-31

⁹⁴ Silverman, 27.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 91.

⁹⁶ Thomson, Belinda. *Gauguin's Vision*. Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2005.

In his article, “The Origin of Paul Gauguin’s Vision after the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel,” art historian Mathew Herban takes into consideration, the “full implications of the paintings religious theme and its symbolism, especially the images and colors that do not traditionally pertain to the Jacob story: the Breton spectators, the cow, the apple tree, and the vermillion.”⁹⁷ Gauguin’s painting illustrates the river Jabbok amongst his imaginatively and symbolically conceived, Biblically-referenced setting—in a modern, if primitivist context. To better understand the context of this ritual, Herban discusses the (institutionally) religious context from which this scene was likely inspired, namely the Breton Pardon ritual.

“While Gauguin’s painting was situated in a new national culture of religious apparitions, it also had distinctive roots in the local Breton context in which he produced it.”⁹⁸ Debora Silverman here reinforces the theory that *The Vision* is a response to an actual devotional festivity of rural Catholicism, and that one of the biggest and most popular of Breton rituals were Pardon ceremonies. In pagan times, the Celts supposedly sacrificed a cow on the site; by the Early Christian era, the sacrificial aspect of the religious ceremony transformed into associations with that of Christ; and at the service *ex-voto* offerings of roughly carved statuettes of cows or of hairs from cows’ tails were presented.⁹⁹ A second custom of the Pardon included the offering of bread, as a Eucharist symbol, and whose buckwheat was grown in the field surrounding the

⁹⁷ Herban, M. "The Origin of Paul Gauguin's Vision after the Sermon." *Art Bulletin*, 1977: 416.

⁹⁸ Silverman, Debora. *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art*. 2000. p. 102.

⁹⁹ Cited in Herban, p. 419; after *Guide bleu de la Bretagne*, Paris, 1920.

chapel.¹⁰⁰ Devotional rituals such as these were held in honor of patron saints, recalled special miracles, and blessed an activity that would take place through Saturday and Sunday—when the traditional Eucharist was held. On Sunday afternoon, the Pardon continued with wrestling matches, in which “young men strove for the honor of carrying the martyred Saint’s gold-embroidered, crimson banner at the head of the Pardon’s final procession.”¹⁰¹ The two Biblical titans of *The Vision* are depicted in the midst of a wrestling match— a signature feature of the pardon ritual.¹⁰² Given this contextual knowledge, Herban concludes that Gauguin’s “subjective reactions to this experience were synthesized and transformed into a subtly dimensioned expression of man’s struggle to understand life—his need for reconciliation with his own conscience, with his fellow men, with nature, and with God.”¹⁰³ Recalling themes previously discussed in van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*, if not more literally, Gauguin’s *Vision after the Sermon* exemplifies humanity’s innate internal struggle between spirituality and Naturalism; however, more than van Gogh, Gauguin opts for anti-Naturalist means to convey this.

In a letter to Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin wrote to that the events of *The Vision* “...exist only in the imaginations of the people praying-as an after-effect of the sermon.”¹⁰⁴ Silverman attributes this to a contrast between the people, who are natural, and the struggle—in *medias res*— in a landscape which is “non-natural and out of proportion;”¹⁰⁵ *The Vision* certainly exemplifies this aesthetic. In explanation of his own piece, Gauguin credits the use of bright

¹⁰⁰ As shown in Emile Bernard’s paintings of 1888. (Herban, p. 419).

¹⁰¹ Cited in Herban, p. 419; after Macquoid, K. S., “The Fair at St. Nicodame,” *Temple Bar*, XLVI, January-April 1876, pp. 287 and 397.

¹⁰² And to attract urban tourists.

¹⁰³ Herban, p. 420.

¹⁰⁴ Cited in Herban, p. 420.

¹⁰⁵ Silverman, pp. 100-101.

vermillion in the landscape “in order to evoke a supernatural realm.”¹⁰⁶ The perspective is distorted with the dwarfed fighting figures, presumably behind the tree which separates the canvas. In the foreground, twelve Breton women and a priest, in an almost circular fashion, experience the display before them—their silent reverence indicated, as we have seen, through closed eyes and gestures of prayer. As previously mentioned, Gauguin slips in a self-portrait among the spectators—perhaps another precursor to his later identification with Christ.

Among his many religious works, Gauguin composed his *Yellow Christ* series sometime between 1889 and 1891. As seen in his *Vision*, Gauguin continues to practice the deliberate anti-naturalism which emphasizes his departure from visual observation. That is, these religious images were not painted directly from life. As seen with van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, this might be recognized as a marriage of observation, and imagination. All colors are purposefully exaggerated to embellish the fantastic effects; the bright red and gold of *The Vision*, and the bright yellows and oranges of his *Yellow Christ* series are all used as means of conveying liberation from earthly connections. Gauguin is attempting, if successfully evoking, an emotional dream-like state.

In his *Yellow Christ* (Fig. 3) Gauguin departs from what is/was ardently considered a sacred image of Christ, in which time and space are usually fixed, to a contemporary, if “primitive” landscape. He places a yellow crucified Christ¹⁰⁷ in a rural field surrounded by mourning peasant women. Yellow fields and orange trees stretch off into distant hills, and faint

¹⁰⁶ Brettell et al., *Art of Gauguin*, p. 157.

¹⁰⁷ Inspired by an actual Breton crucifix hanging inside the Trémalo chapel near Pont-Aven—he simply transposed the figure to an outdoor setting.

suggestions of a populated village reside in the distant background. This is all quite purposeful on the part of Gauguin, for in doing so, he has successfully removed the sacred Crucifixion scene from its general accepted historical and religious context, and in effect gives rise to the question of ‘modern sacrality.’¹⁰⁸ As commonly seen in much of Gauguin’s work, though by different means, Gauguin experiments with flatness and simplification of form. He reduces Christ to his most basic musculature, the effect of which is only exaggerates his sickly, jaundice pallor. But even Gauguin subscribes to some basic conventions of Christ’s portrayal: unlike Manet’s *Dead Christ*, the spear wound here seeps from his right side.

Among the series of that same period, one may find yet another step toward Gauguin’s identification in his *Self-Portrait with Yellow Christ* (Fig. 4). Gauguin has here painted a self-portrait in which he juxtaposes himself between his previous *Yellow Christ* study, and an abstract ceramic piece, the latter of which he modeled as a grotesque self-portrait alluding to Incan pottery, and serves as manifestation of Gauguin’s primitive Peruvian “heritage.” While self-sacrificing identifications were only implied by its title in Gauguin’s *Les Misérables*, this self-portrait is more flagrant—especially given that the stoneware pottery alluded to a guillotined murderer, and likely John the Baptist, as well as van Gogh’s mutilated ear.¹⁰⁹ But he here blends his identification as the Peruvian savage with that of Christ-martyr—joining the two in what could perhaps be labeled the “savage Christ.” This is perhaps reminiscent of van Gogh’s *bonze* portrait, in which Buddhism and Christianity come together in a more universal spirituality.

¹⁰⁸ Silverman, 281.

¹⁰⁹ Thomson, Belinda. *Gauguin: Maker of Myth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 72.

According to Silverman, “This painting completed the cluster of images that reengaged Gauguin...in themes that had a particular resonance with his theological formation.”¹¹⁰ *Christ at Gethsemane*, or *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (Fig. 5) is perhaps the culmination of his identification of the modern, savage martyr, with his unmistakable presentation of himself as Christ. This painting depicts the section from the Book of Luke just before the famed, ultimate betrayal. This piece successfully serves to express Christ’s “anguished recognition of his isolation and rejection.”¹¹¹ The viewer is at once greeted with the vibrant red hair¹¹² and sickly pallor of a deeply-dejected Christ in the foreground; his eyes either closed or looking down, he grieves for himself. An olive tree stands just behind him amongst the indistinguishable cool hues of the surrounding hills, and two dark figures retreat toward the background, casting a final glance in Christ’s direction.

Beyond the flagrant insertion of his own features into the Christ figure—namely his distinguishing nose—Gauguin explicitly states that this is in fact a self-portrait. This of course draws a thematic parallel with Manet’s *Jesus Mocked by Soldiers*—though less subtly. Stung by critical and financial misfortune, Gauguin felt proverbially nailed to his own cross. As stated in a letter esteemed colleague, Emile Bernard:

*Of all my struggles this year, nothing remains save the jeers of Paris; even here, I can hear them, and I am so discouraged that I no longer dare to paint...let them look carefully at my recent things...and they will see how much there is in them of resigned suffering.*¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 295.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Perhaps as a reference to colleague Vincent van Gogh.

¹¹³ Brettell et al., *Art of Gauguin*, p. 163; French in Malingue, *Gauguin*, pp. 173, 175.

By this point, Gauguin was associating Christ's martyrdom with resignation and defeat rather than exaltation—as such a scene as this was usually otherwise depicted. Gauguin did reject conventional and institutionalized religion, but his theological education was embedded into his character, if unconsciously.¹¹⁴ And as with Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, Gauguin in fact intended no sacrilege or disrespect—rather, he simply identified with the one whom he found embodied the poetry of human suffering, contrasting significantly with van Gogh, who, out of personal moral obligation, chose to depict such themes, less ironically and more tangibly via landscape and Nature.

Conclusion

Gauguin identified with and painted a symbolic self-portrait as Christ the martyr. Controversy surrounding his work stirs within his self-identification as the suffering martyr, who embodies the ultimate poetry of humanity, i.e. suffering. Manet, van Gogh, and Gauguin each evoke new ways of regarding religious subjects. Manet disenchanting Christ as nothing more than human; van Gogh suggests potential themes of spirituality versus Nature more tangibly by way of expressive landscape; and Gauguin boldly identifies his own artistic martyrdom with that of Christ. These different methods, ranging from Naturalism to Symbolism, question the notions of what is considered sacred in modern, progressive society, and in effect give permission for others to do the same.

¹¹⁴ Silverman, 123.



Fig. 1 Gauguin, *Les Misérables*, oil on canvas, 45 x 55cm, 1888.



Fig. 2 Gauguin, *Vision after the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)*, 73 x 92.7cm, 1888. Art History Survey Collection.

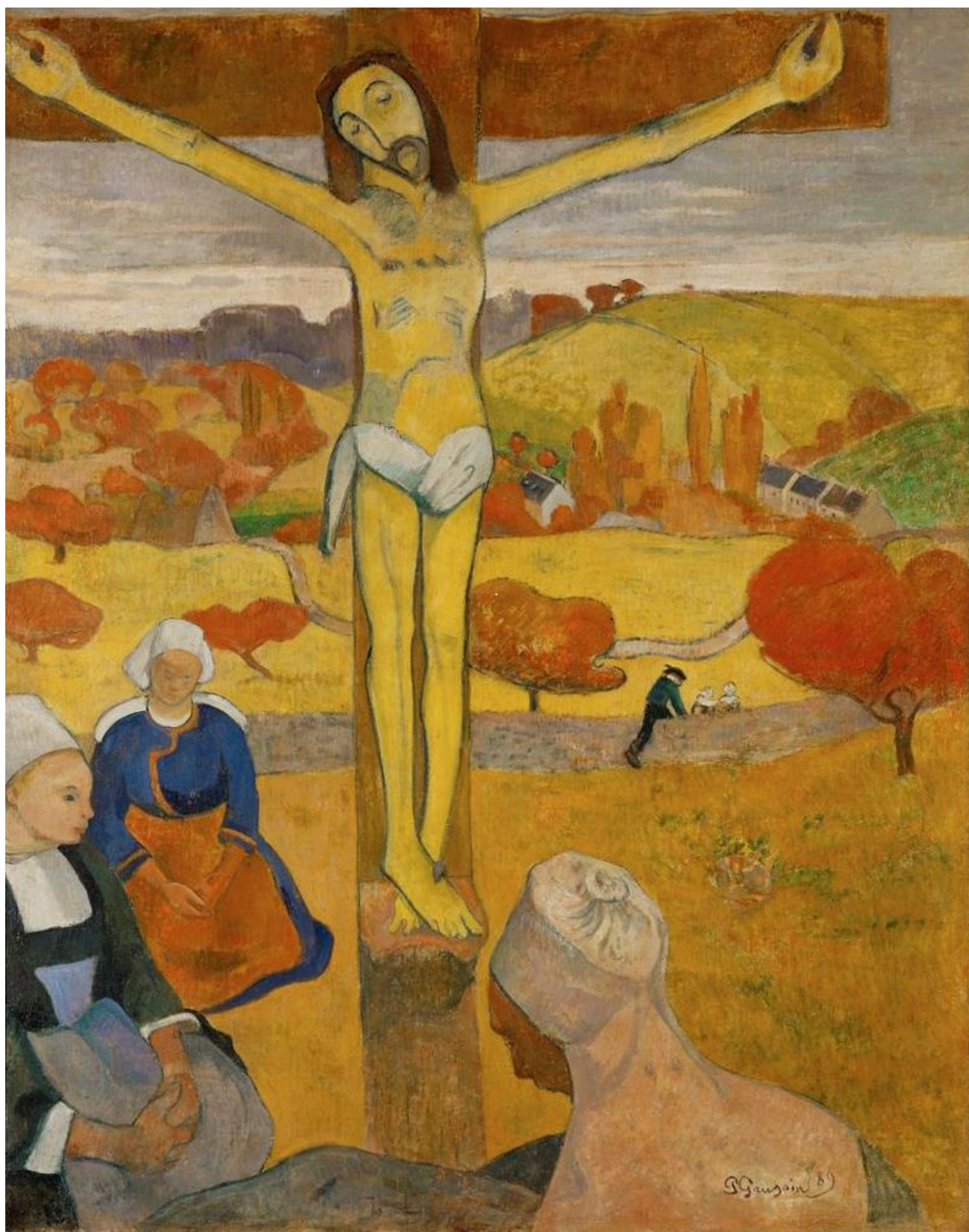


Fig. 3 Manet, *Yellow Christ*, oil on canvas, 92 X 73 cm, 1889. Albright-Knox Art Gallery.



Fig. 4 Gauguin, *Self-Portrait with Yellow Christ*, oil on canvas, 38 x 46 cm, 1890-1. Musée d'Orsay.

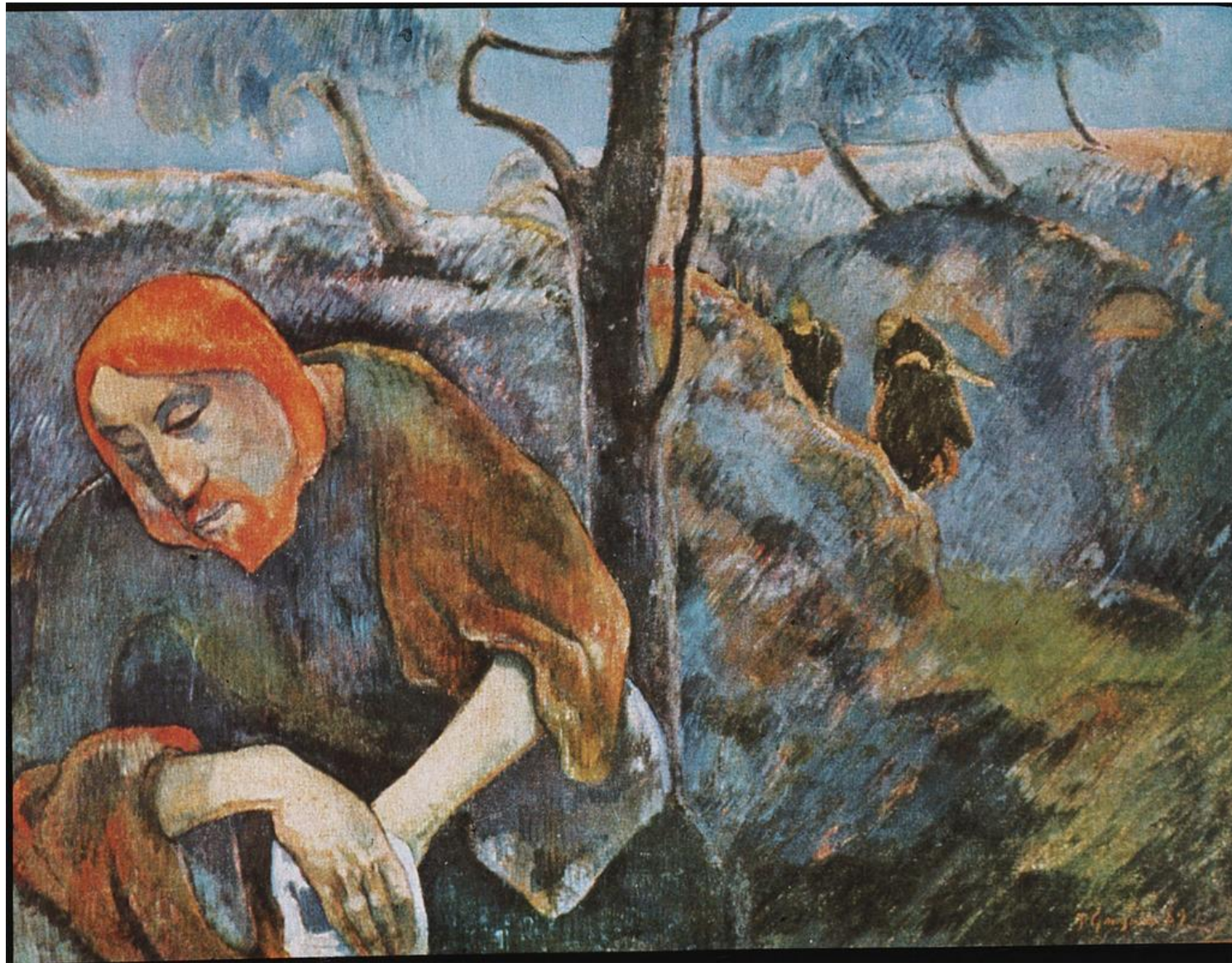


Fig. 5 Gauguin, *Christ in the Garden of Olives*, oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm, 1889. Norton Gallery and School of Art.

Conclusion

In the broadest terms, van Gogh and Gauguin differed on the role of the imagination in picture-making. Gauguin was a great advocate of artistic invention, and felt no qualms about imaging the supernatural—as in “The Vision after the Sermon.” Van Gogh, in contrast, was willing and even inclined to manipulate reality, but felt compelled to work from an observed motif.¹¹⁵

In 1863, Ernest Renan intervened in the French discord between religion and secularism in writing the book that would give way to a new vision of the Biblical Jesus—effectually withdrawing him from his divine throne, to a more humble, even sinful mortality. Renan made Jesus a simple man who surmounted the same sinful temptations we all face, but he ultimately suffered greatly and succumbed to his own mortality. Manet depicts Christ as this simple, average human man—in perhaps a reality disturbing to its audience—with only a subtle reference to an oppressed, self-sacrificing identification. Gauguin meanwhile, being an everyday man himself, identified with and painted a symbolic self-portrait as Christ the martyr. And van Gogh potentially translated the intensity of his inner spiritual struggle into an expressive, dazzling landscape. The source of dispute in Manet’s work resides within implied apathy toward the sacred subject, providing images of Jesus as a mere man rather than the divine Son of God—disconcerting, if not gruesome in their Naturalism. Struggling between Naturalism and Symbolism, van Gogh has been posthumously transfigured from failing artist to artistic visionary and modern martyr. Gauguin’s Symbolist polemic stirs

¹¹⁵ Sund, p. 669.

within the artist's self-identification as the suffering martyr who embodies human suffering. By varied methods, Manet, van Gogh, and Gauguin all evoke new ways of regarding religious subjects—their spiritual ambiguity only inciting further academic investigation and interpretation. Much of their respective oeuvres hover amidst the thick tension hanging between Naturalism and religion/spiritual revival—personal/societal convictions which are often juxtaposed as inherently incongruous, but this does not necessarily have to be the case.

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